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RR RUEHCD RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHLA RUEHMRE
DE RUEHSK #1462/01 3391108
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 051108Z DEC 05
FM AMEMBASSY MINSK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3419
INFO RUCNOSC/ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY COOPERATION IN EUROPE
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 MINSK 001462

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY REPORT - December 02, 2005

11. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk over the past week.

Human Rights

12. Stricter Laws on Discrediting Belarus

On December 25, the lower house of Pqliament overwhelmingly approved the first reading of amendments to Belarus' criminal code that would introduce severe penalties for activities deemed "revolutionary" and harmful to the public. On December 2, the lower house approved the second reading. The bill now only needs the upper house's approval and President's signature to become law. Under the amendments, participating in street demonstrations, discrediting Belarus' image abroad, appealing to foreign nations and international organizations to "act to the detriment of Belarus," and spreading "false" information about Belarus would be criminal offenses warranting two to three years in prison. Chief of the BKGB Stepan Sukhorenko commented to reporters that the new amendments would help prevent the opposition from using street demonstrations to interfere with the 2006 presidential election. When asked by a reporter what constitutes "discrediting" Belarus, Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration and trained lawyer Natalia Petkevych explained, "If you say that bears are walking the streets of our city, that is discrediting Belarus. If you say we beat people morning, noon and night, that is discrediting Belarus, because it is not true."

13. Kurapaty Memorial Site Vandalized

During the week of November 27, vandals desecrated crosses and monuments at Kurapaty, the memorial site outside Minsk dedicated to the tens of thousands of Belarusians executed by Stalin's NKVD in the 1930s. The top of the memorial bench former President Bill Clinton presented to Belarus on behalf of the U.S. was knocked over. The vandals also carved a swastika into the face of an icon on a cross near the entrance. Approximately twelve out of the hundreds of crosses at Kurapaty were damaged. Historian and researcher Igor Kuznetsov told poloff that a memorial plaque disappeared and a number of photographs of victims were destroyed. The police denied vandalism had occurred, but admitted that the Clinton bench was overturned. According to on-line independent news source Interfax, the police blamed this on severe weather conditions [note: the bench is thick granite]. By the following morning, most of the damage had been remedied including replacing the top of the bench.

14. Student Expelled for Traveling Abroad

On November 24, Belarusian State Economic University expelled straight "A" student Tatiana Khoma after returning from a National Union of Students in Europe (ESIB) meeting in France. School officials reported that she was expelled for her three-

day school absence without permission, "flagrant disrespect of internal regulations," and for putting herself in danger due to the "difficult" internal political situation and France's state of emergency. Teachers and students suspect Khoma was expelled for participating in and being elected to the Executive Committee of the ESIB, Europe's largest student organization committed to defending students' rights and interests.

15. Employee Issuing New Life Church Document Fired

On November 30, the Minsk city authorities fired the employee who issued the new technical passport to the New Life Church. The new passport allowed their "cow barn" to be classified as a religious building of worship. The authorities fired the employee for issuing the passport illegally. The passport was subsequently annulled. Without it, the New Life Church will not be able to register their "cow barn" as their legal address.

16. Minsk Kiosks Drop Independent Newspaper Salidarnasts

On November 30, the state run newspaper and kiosk network MinskgorSouyuzpechat canceled its 2006 distribution contract with the independent weekly Salidarnasts. The editor received no explanation for the annulment. On December 1, the Grodno branch of the state subscription monopoly Belpochta canceled its distribution contract with the independent newspaper "Gazeta Slonimskaya." [Note: These are the latest examples of the state monopolies' trend to drop independent media from subscription lists and newsstands.]

17. Youths Threatened with Expulsion for Supporting Opposition

On November 27, Svetlogorsk schools threatened to expel youth group members who participated in the opposition-led November

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16 "Day of Solidarity." The demonstration occurs on the 16th of every month and is dedicated to those persecuted by the GOB. The youth leaders called the threats attempts to intimidate and discourage students from political participation.

18. No Criminal Investigation into Journalist's Death

On November 28, the Minsk District Prosecutor's Office decided not to launch an investigation into the death of free-lance Narodnaya Volya journalist Vasily Grodnikov, citing lack of crime evidence at the scene. Grodnikov died from a head injury caused by a blunt object on October 18.

19. Slander Case Against Human Rights Lawyer Dropped

The Minsk City Prosecutor's Office on November 16 dropped its slander case against human rights lawyer for the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) Garry Poganyailo. In May, the Ministry of Justice brought charges against the lawyer for allegedly slandering Lukashenko while giving an interview on Sweden's TV 4 channel in 2004. In the interview, Poganyailo accused Lukashenko and various top GOB officials of being involved in the disappearances of several opposition figures. The court, in a written statement, concluded that Poganyailo slandered no one.

110. BHC Cannot Spend Foreign Aid

The Presidential Administration property management department on November 25 rejected the BHC's offer to settle its dispute over foreign financial aid out of court. The department rejected BHC's registration of USD 1,000 provided by the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights to pay for BHC's rent and telephone bills. BHC's appeal will be held on December 7.

111. Belarus Closes 36 NGO's for Major Violations

On December 2, the GOB announced that Belarus liquidated 36

NGO's in the first nine months of 2005 for violations of Belarusian law or their own statutes. Ten of the 36 NGOs were national or international organizations. None of the appeals against the liquidations have been decided.

¶12. New Charges for Gomel Activist

On November 26, Gomel police officers entered opposition activist Maria Bogdanovich's apartment after allegedly receiving a tip that she was harboring illegal Vietnamese immigrants. On November 27, the district and criminal police officers arrived at Bogdanovich's apartment and accused her of distributing leaflets about her November 21 trial (at which she was fined USD 95 for distributing fliers without the printer's name and address). The officers seized 1,500 opposition leaflets from her residence, claiming several people were detained the day before for distributing identical leaflets. Her hearing is scheduled for December 7.

¶13. Czechs Detained

On November 28, Belarusian authorities refused to give passes to enter radioactive zones to former deputy environment minister of the Czech Republic J. Skalicki and Czech ecologist from Charles University in Prague I. Rynda. After a visit to Kamaryn, a village not far from the zone, BKGB agents detained the officials for allegedly visiting the border area without permission. The Czech officials were questioned for several hours and filmed by the state media.

¶14. GOB to Control University Admissions

On November 29, Lukashenko informed the Belarusian Council of Rectors of Higher Education Institutions that he would introduce at the end of December new admission rules for vocational and higher education institutions. The rules would require two state commissions to oversee the admission process and would rework entrance and exit exams. The guidelines are intended to ensure transparency and control over the admission process. The President opined that the fall of the Soviet Union prevented lower-income groups and rural residents from entering private universities. Bribery is also a problem and the educational staff does not favor the current system.

¶15. GOB Warns Unregistered Baptist Church for Illegal Worship

On November 25, the GOB issued a warning to Reformed Baptist Church Christ's Covenant's Pastor Gregory Vyazovsky for allegedly conducting illegal worship in a private Minsk residence. Belarusian law forbids religious services in residential buildings without special permission. In addition, the church received three warnings for failing to register a

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"legal address."

Civil Society

¶16. A Monument to the Potato

On December 1, several news sources reported that the GOB plans to build a monument marking the 150 anniversary of Belarus' first potato harvest. The bronze monument will be in the shape of a half-peeled potato and placed on Pobediteli Avenue (formerly Masherov Avenue). The spiral peel would represent the "spiral of time" and Belarus' "inseparable" connection to the potato. The GOB plans to imbue the monument with "magic power," bringing luck to everyone who touches it. Minister of Agriculture Leonid Rusak is expected to participate its dedication ceremony, which is to be accompanied with the soon-to-be-composed "Ode to Potato."

¶17. KGB Promises No Colored Revolution in Belarus

On November 29, the Belarus Committee for State Security (BKGB)

promised to prevent anti-government protests during the 2006 presidential campaigns. BKBG head Stepan Sukhorenko stated that Western countries and the U.S. want regime change in Belarus via colored revolutions. He claimed the West uses NGO's, youth groups, the opposition, exchange programs, and broadcasting to spread its influence. Sukhorenko added, "Any activity aimed at the violent overthrow of the legitimate government is under close watch."

118. An Association of Pensioners

On November 27, a group of retirees applied to the Minsk city authorities for permission to hold a founding convention for the Association of Pensioners. On November 28, the Association for the Union and the Communist Party of the Union (AUCPU) accused the opposition of creating the Association of Pensioners to split the national organization of veterans. According to AUCPU coordinator Leonid Shkolnikov, the new association will weaken the existing organization of veterans and its "deserved" support for President Lukashenko.

119. Humanitarian Aid to Pakistan

On November 30, the Ministry of Emergency Situations announced it was sending humanitarian cargo to several regions of Pakistan affected by the earthquake. Three trucks and two escort vehicles delivered the cargo to Moscow, from where it would be shipped by plane to Pakistan. The cargo, worth USD 200,000, included 8,800 half-woolen blankets, 24 "extra-large" tents, 9,900 cans of tinned beef, 9,000 cans of tinned beef with buckwheat porridge, and 2,000 packs of bandages.

Election

120. State Polling Links Gay Support to Opposition

On November 24, the state run polling institution ECOOM Analytical Center "revealed" that opposition candidate Milinkevich's popularity rating would jump six points if he supported sexual minorities. ECOOM also announced that 45 percent of those polled feel negative about the fact that Milinkevich supports homosexuals.

Economics

121. Belarus to Eliminate Customs Duties with Russia

At a November 28 news conference, Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksandr Mikhnevich announced that Belarus plans to eliminate the differences in custom duties it has with Russia on 1,700 commodities. According to Mikhnevich, the differences do not affect either country, but 200 duties will be unified while the rest will be fixed for "objective reasons." Mikhnevich claimed Belarus would keep duties on oil products lower than those in Russia.

122. GOB Progresses in WTO Accession with Cuba and China

On November 28, Belarus and China initialed the necessary World Trade Organization (WTO) accession documents outlining China's access to Belarus' commodity markets. Similar negotiations on commodity market access were also completed between Cuba and Belarus, to be signed in Hong Kong. This will be the first protocol Belarus signs.

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123. Foreign Companies Petition Economic Court

On November 30, the Supreme Economic Court announced it received 76 complaints from foreign companies in 2005. Most cases involved nonpayment by Belarusian partners. Poland and

the United States submitted the most claims, 14 and 13, respectively. [Note: Foreign companies account for approximately three percent of investment in the Belarusian economy.]

124. Money from Industries Will Fund Budget

On November 30, the GOB announced that major industries in which the GOB has a majority shareholding will have to use their revenues from the first half of the year to supplement the budget by BYR 105.2 billion [USD 48.9 million] in addition to paying their regular taxes. Belaruskali, a potassium fertilizer producer, and Belarusneft, a petrochemical producer, will pay the brunt of the money at BYR 64 billion [USD 30 million] and BYR 14 billion [USD 6.5 million] respectively.

125. Missiles for Belarus

Chairman of the Belarusian Security Council Gennady Nevyglas informed reporters on November 29 that Russia would ship the first consignment of S-300 surface-to-air missiles to Belarus in March 2006. Two divisions of S-300s would be shipped to Belarus' western borders to counter the "NATO threat" to Belarus. According to Nevyglas, the missiles would double Belarus' capability to strike targets. However, Nevyglas admitted that the systems were not yet combat ready.

----- Bilateral Relations -----

126. Belarus and China's Partnership

Lukashenko told a visiting Chinese reporter on December 1 that Belarus and China's economic cooperation has great prospects. Belarus would like to sell its products on the Chinese market, buy Chinese goods, and establish joint ventures in China. According to the President, because of China's huge economy, it would not be difficult for China to "pull up" Belarus' economy. GOB figures claim trade between the two countries reached USD 459 million (up 96 percent) with Belarus' trade surplus reaching USD 143 million. In January-September, the trade volume between China and Belarus grew 60 percent on the year to USD 502 million. Belarus exports to China include potassium fertilizers, dump trucks, chemicals, and machinery.

127. Chinese Ambassador Dissatisfied with Investment Climate

China's Ambassador to Belarus Wu Hongbin told reporters on November 29 that Chinese businessmen would like to invest more in Belarus' economy if it were not for Belarus' poor investment climate. Hongbin noted how Chinese companies had the resources to invest, but were Qree to decide, based on economics rather than governmental influence, where to invest. According to Hongbin, Belarusian-Chinese relations should be based on market economy rules with minimal government interference.

----- Quotes of the Week -----

128. On December 1, deputy Minister of Justice Aleksandr Petrash spoke about the introduction of an amendment to the criminal code that mandates severe penalties for participating in street protests or telling "lies" about Belarus to foreign countries:

"You do not say anything bad about your family, wife and children in public. You should not say anything bad about your country as well."

129. On November 23, Lukashenko reiterated that Belarus and Russia would not be a puppet of the West:

"Russia and Belarus are able to chew up and spit out American democracy."